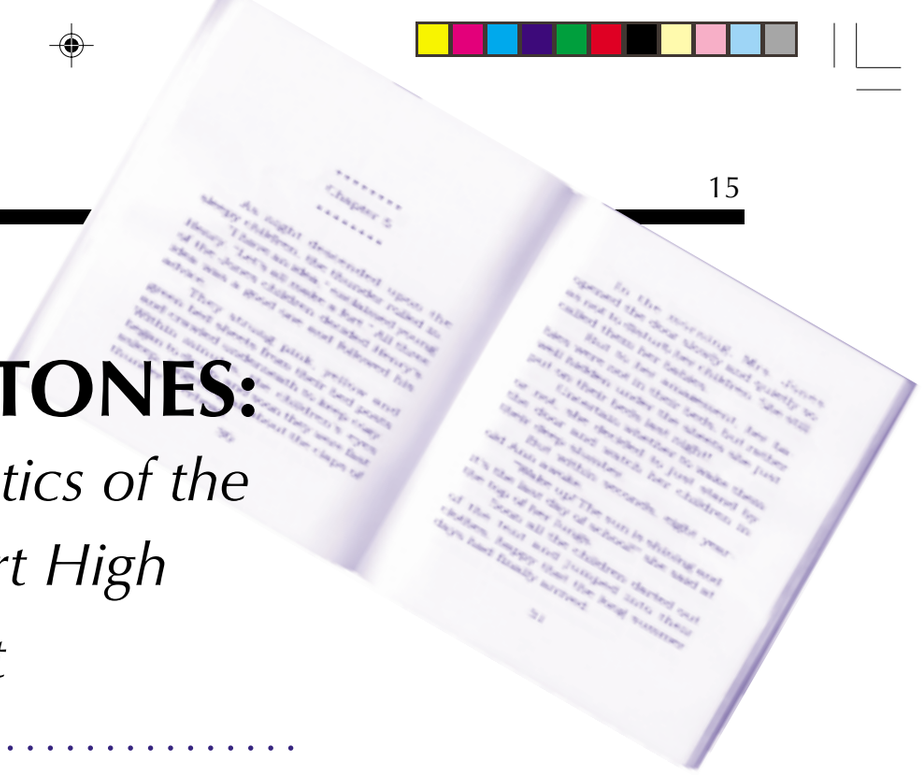


THE CORNERSTONES:

Common Characteristics of the Contexts That Support High Literacy Achievement

As the description of the research design suggests, in order to identify a range of common characteristics that are evident in schools with successful early literacy programs, two sources of data were examined: responses in the 78 written surveys returned and comments from participants at the Bar Harbor conference. From these data sources, six common characteristics emerged:

1. **Professional development is shared, ongoing, and supported in a number of ways;**
2. **Student performance data are used to improve student achievement;**
3. **School staff work together to find solutions to instructional issues;**
4. **Effective leadership is present, though it can come from people in different roles;**
5. **Parents and community are engaged in multiple ways; and**
6. **Various resources are used to respond to students' needs.**

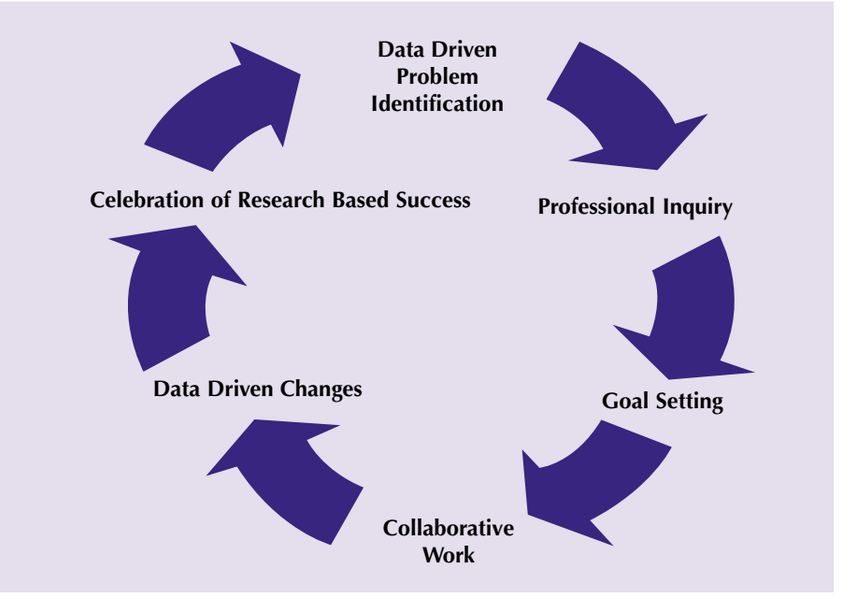
In the sections below, each of these common characteristics will be described in greater detail and supported with survey data and anecdotal comments from the Bar Harbor conference participants. In addition, implications for practice and questions for further inquiry will be listed for each common characteristic.

Model for Effecting Change

One overarching theme emerged from the conversations at the Bar Harbor conference: even though the schools that participated in the conference started from different places in their search for better literacy practices, a recursive process with common steps was evident in each school. This collaborative process began with the identification of an area in need of improvement based on a review of student achievement data, then moved to a review of research for ideas to address the challenge. Goals were set, and staff worked together to achieve these goals. Data analysis led to changes in practice. Finally, schools found ways to celebrate their successes. This process became a pattern that was repeated for another literacy challenge selected for improvement. A model of the process appears below:

As teachers spend more time as learners, the impact is felt in the classroom. We are now a a profession of life-long learners; we're not just talking about it.

— Bar Harbor conference participant



This approach of collaborative inquiry was reflected in all of the schools participating in the Bar Harbor conference. Many teacher participants indicated they expected to work in an atmosphere of shared professional learning. Their expectation was that schools would offer them opportunities to meet to discuss insights, agree on shared goals, and examine student work in the context of those goals. The change process itself, in that sense, provided the context in which improved literacy practices took root and flourished. Several of the common characteristics described in this report relate directly to this larger process that schools used to analyze and improve their practice.

1 Professional Learning is Shared, Ongoing, and Supported in a Number of Ways

Survey and conference data indicate that on-going professional development occurs in a variety of ways and addresses a number of literacy topics. Survey data reflect staff development formats most commonly used to improve reading instruction (See Table 1). Data from the survey also indicate that 25% of K-4 teachers hold a Master's degree, while about 10% of K-4 teachers have earned a Master's degree in literacy. Survey data also suggest teacher engagement in a variety of professional development topics specific to reading instruction (See Table 2).

TABLE 1

Format	Percent of Schools
Professional Workshops	70%
District Workshops	66%
Peer Review/Ongoing Structured Teacher Collaboration	48%
Regional Conferences	44%
Courses Provided by On-Site Professional Development Person	40%
University Coursework	37%
National Conferences	8%

TABLE 2

Professional Development Topic	Percent of Schools
Reading/Language Arts Instruction	63%
Instruction for Low Achieving Students	56%
Learning Results Alignment and Standards Work	48%
Performance Assessment	43%
Interpreting Achievement Test Information	27%
Classroom Management Techniques	19%
Other Curriculum Content Instruction (e.g., science)	17%
Parent Involvement/Volunteerism	14%
Accelerated Learning Techniques	13%
Higher Order Thinking Skills Instruction	11%
School-Based Management/ Decision-Making	6%

These survey findings are supported by reports provided by participants in the Bar Harbor conference. Participants highlighted a number of ways in which professional development for literacy topics is provided in an ongoing fashion in their schools.

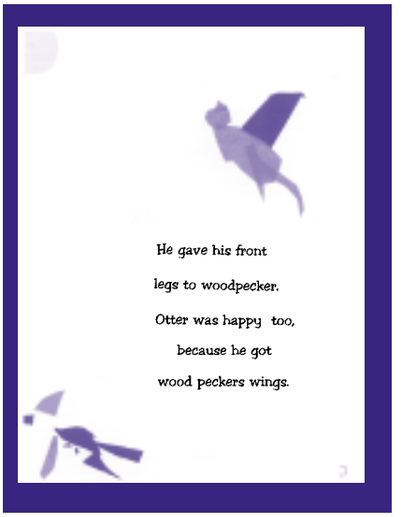
University Coursework

Teachers mentioned engaging in university coursework, including outreach courses and cohort formats sponsored through the University of Maine System. These courses targeted classroom practice, incorporating both phonemic awareness and literature-based approaches. One rural school reported taking advantage of its closeness to a university site by supporting extensive staff development, and 50% of the teachers there had earned a Master's degree, with 33% of these degrees in literacy.

The role that the Reading Recovery™ program, sponsored by the University of Maine and the Maine Department of Education, has played in staff development was mentioned by more than half of the schools in the conference sample. The grounding that teachers have received in reading theory through the Reading Recovery™ model was seen as particularly helpful. Peer observation and coaching were viewed as significant to the training process. The schools in the conference sample referred to Reading Recovery™ as a "catalyst" for helping them discover strategies for — and improvements of their understanding about teaching — all children to read. They believed that it had given them practical help in reflecting on their literacy programs and that it "opened up a drive for better practice."

Creative writing

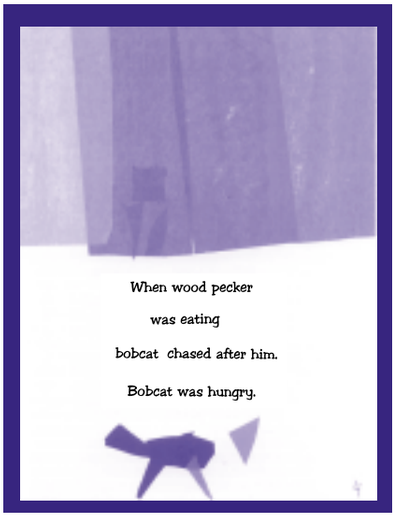
– Grade two

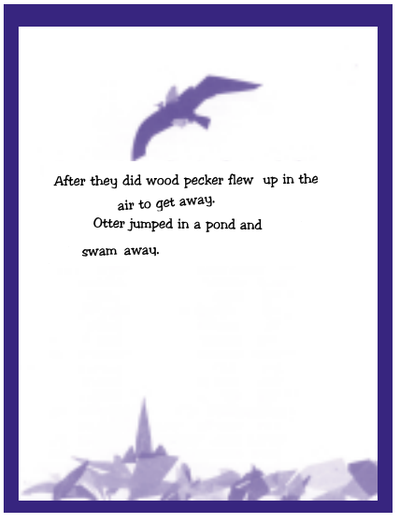


On-site Consultants

Some schools participating in the conference had been able to bring an outside consultant on-site, either for a week of training for teachers in the summer or for repeated workshops. Two schools had used a consultant for help on phonemic awareness, writing, spelling and using data to inform instruction. Another district had used a consultant to train teachers in the Assured Readiness for Learning program, a train-the-trainer model.

Another method of supporting classroom teachers, described by conference participants, was the commitment of their schools and districts to add literacy specialists to the staff. Most of the schools in the conference sample had access to a literacy leader. These literacy leaders—literacy specialists, Title I or Reading Recovery teachers, or classroom teachers with expert knowledge—have provided resources and "guided practice" to teachers who were trying to use new techniques. A rural school district described using Title I funds to develop a network of building-level literacy coordinators who in turn trained Title I tutors and worked with classroom teachers. Another approach, sponsored by the University of Maine, called the "Literacy Collaborative," features a literacy coordinator who, by working directly in the school building, models classroom strategies, works with teachers on literacy problems with specific children, and provides professional development seminars for teachers. A description of the Literacy Collaborative Model can be found in Appendix D.





Building on Whole School Initiatives

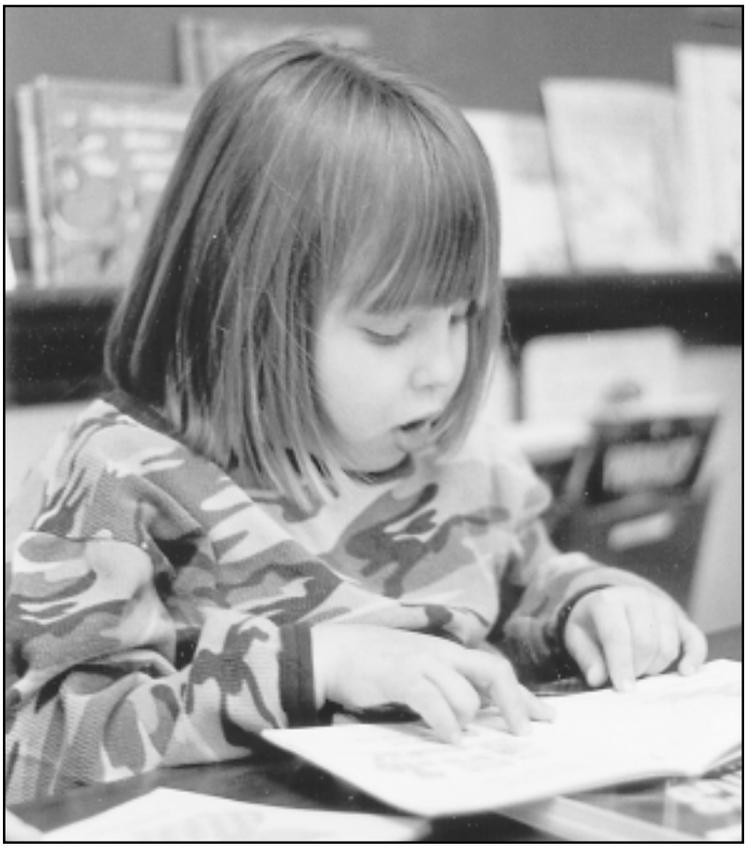
Conference participants shared a third technique for ongoing professional development in the area of literacy. Some of the schools in the conference sample had identified frameworks they had used for other curriculum initiatives and had transferred those frameworks to their work on literacy issues. One small city school had built on concepts contained in the "Success for All" model. Although the effort was never fully funded, concepts and goals laid out in the model were still influencing teachers' practice. Another school had been part of the Maine Math and Science "Beacon Project" and saw that experience as helping teachers understand what standards were all about. Teachers in that school were using science as the content area for many of the children's early reading assignments.

Implications

Different techniques or formats for professional development have served as catalysts for improving literacy practices. It will be important for each school and district to examine what techniques have been employed, evaluate their impact on classroom practices, and consider implications for further growth. Beyond the school district, if the lessons learned from this investigation are to be applied in other schools, then regional resources, inter-district collaborations, and state-level programs will need to be strengthened to ensure every literacy teacher has access to high quality professional development. The partnership among local districts, the University of Maine, and the Department of Education to introduce Reading Recovery™ into schools should serve as a continuing source of professional learning and sharing and as a model for other initiatives. The findings of this report also reinforce the importance of making expert knowledge—generally in the form of the literacy specialist—accessible enough to teachers for frequent consultation. Finally, current local and state systems for inducting new teachers into the profession must be examined with a sharp focus on implications for teachers in early literacy programs.

Questions for Further Inquiry

- How can we ensure that teacher preparation programs provide sufficient training in early literacy practices?
- Given the importance of high-quality professional development in literacy for teachers in the primary grades, how can we strengthen the state and local infrastructures to ensure access to these opportunities in all parts of Maine?
- How can we ensure that professional development plans include learning opportunities for all those who work with young readers, including reading tutors, Title I teachers, educational technicians, and others?
- How can we strengthen teacher induction programs to ensure that beginning primary grade teachers are given access to expert literacy knowledge and support during the formative years of their practice?



A Closer Look . . . *Reading Recovery*

Reading Recovery™ could not be provided without collaboration among educational stakeholders: the State Department of Education, the Center for Early Literacy at the University of Maine and local school districts in all regions of Maine. The Department of Education has provided leadership and vision in promoting quality education in the early years and adopting the concept of early intervention to prevent reading difficulties. This leadership and vision set the stage for a variety of professional development efforts targeted toward teachers working at the K-5 level, including Reading Recovery™. Since 1993 the Maine State Legislature has allocated funds to help support Reading Recovery™ training and implementation. In addition, Title I funds, distributed through the Department of Education, provide a major source of literacy staffing and professional development in Maine.

The Center for Early Literacy at the University of Maine has been a key partner in developing the professional development courses for Reading Recovery™ and K-5 teachers. The Center houses a Trainer/Coordinator who trains and supports Reading Recovery™ teacher leaders. Local school districts house teacher leaders and provide behind-the-glass training facilities to promote peer coaching and actual hands-on learning by the teachers. With the commitment of local school districts, Reading Recovery™ and in-service courses for K-5 teachers can be provided in every region of Maine, including some island schools and schools in the remotest parts of Maine.

During the school year 1997-98, 336 teachers provided Reading Recover™ instruction for 2,171 children in 217 schools throughout Maine. In addition, Reading Recovery™ teachers and teacher leaders often served as staff developers, teaching their colleagues how to take running records, how to use the Observation Survey (Clay, 1993), and how to teach reading strategies. In addition, Reading Recovery™ has sparked a need for high quality professional development for all primary level educators. A yearlong course for teachers at this level uses the behind-the-glass facilities at Reading Recovery™ sites. Over 930 K-3 teachers have participated in this course, impacting an estimated 20,460 Maine children. A similar course for teachers at grades 3-5 is also offered statewide.

The goal of the stakeholder collaboration described above is to provide classroom, Reading Recovery™, and special education teachers with consistent and high quality professional development through the use of research-based teaching practices. In this way, we can ensure that Maine's young children will pass through the early years of education with seamless transitions between classrooms and special programs, and from grade to grade, in their journey towards becoming fluent readers.

Paula Moore, Director,
Center for Early Literacy,
University of Maine

2 Performance Data are Used to Improve Student Achievement

Maine's *Learning Results* legislation calls for the establishment of a comprehensive State and local assessment system. The State part of that system is the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA), established in 1985. Work at both state and local levels is currently underway to help local systems understand the importance of rethinking traditional ways of grading, ranking, and assessing students. At the local level, teachers and students are learning how to use quality work as a guide to instruction rather than using testing as a ranking and sorting mechanism. The goal at both the state and local levels is to use performance data as feedback that can inform instruction.

Setting Higher Goals

The Maine *Learning Results* set forth an explicit commitment to the success of *all* students. Conference participants' comments about increased expectations for student achievement highlighted the importance of teachers believing that all children can succeed. The general consensus among the participating schools was that this belief was a "root cause" for better student performance. Overall, conference participants suggested that their belief that all children can learn has been strengthened by the increasing ability of teachers

"Any current effort to prevent reading difficulties occurs in the context of "systemic reform", the term used to describe state initiatives begun in the last decade to improve education. Systemic reform involves the interaction of (a) high standards for all children, (b) assessments to measure the achievement of the standards, and (c) the capacity of teachers and schools to ensure that children achieve the standards."

(Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 299)

to understand and use a variety of both data-analysis and instructional practices to meet individual needs. Moreover, this belief in the importance of each child appears to have had profound implications on how teachers use assessment data.

Using Data to Inform Instruction

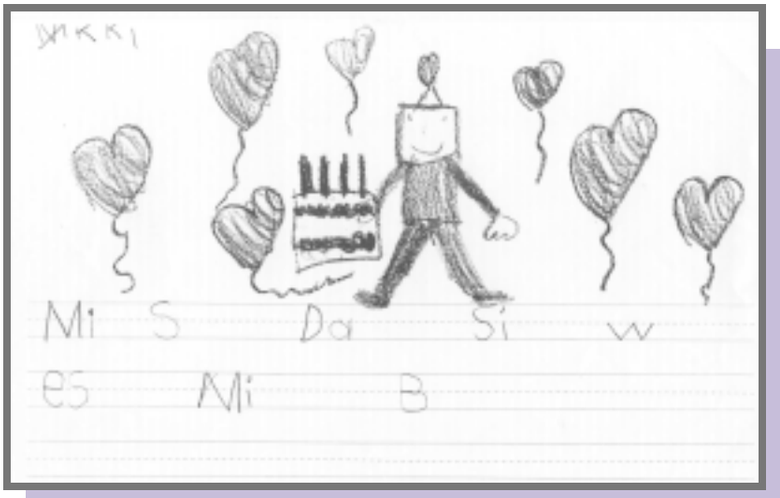
Survey data showed a clear pattern among primary classrooms in successful schools of using frequent formal and informal methods of assessing children's performance and then using that assessment to adjust instruction. Evidence of how student performance data is used was collected in the survey and is displayed in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Assess (most often on a weekly basis) to inform instruction	64.1%
Assess (weekly) for diagnostic purposes	41.0%
Assess (weekly) to determine effectiveness of reading curriculum	29.5%
Use running records of oral reading behavior "a great deal" to align curriculum, instruction and assessment	40.0%
Do not use running records	10.0%
Assess (on a weekly basis) to assign a letter grade	21.8%
Assess (on a yearly basis) to assign a letter grade	1.3%

MEA Data

All of the schools participating in the conference had used the MEA data as an external standard to help them judge progress in their overall programs. Low or disappointing MEA scores had often served as a catalyst for organizing efforts to improve MEA results. MEA scores had been used for professional development purposes, providing a large data bank to track progress for all students. One school had targeted open-ended writing practices in the third grade in order to help students understand how to approach the questions and prompts they would encounter on the fourth grade MEA.



Fall writing prompts

– Kindergarten

MEA scores had also been analyzed to support school districts' multi-year studies of instructional practice. Over time, this analysis led to a range of ways for keeping track of student progress with the focus on what teachers know when students come to them, and what they know when those students leave.

Other Literacy Assessments

In addition to MEA data, a variety of literacy assessment tools was used regularly by conference participants. Some assessments commonly mentioned include: running records; Clay's Observation Survey (Clay, 1993); student portfolios; and assessments based on "leveled" trade books to help teachers match students with instructional texts. All of the schools participating in the conference had focused teachers' attention on student work across more than one classroom, and had used common scoring guides for student work to support consistent interpretation of standards across classroom and grade levels. A number of schools had used student portfolios for keeping track of samples of student work over time.

In addition, conference participants indicated that staff development offered to teachers who had helped score MEA writing assessments, had gradually led schools to develop their own school-wide scoring events of student writing. "Blind" scoring, without student names attached, was frequently used as a means to focus discussion on school-wide standards and program quality rather than on individual student scores.

"Real improvements will come about not because standards have been written by committees but because the standards come alive when teachers study student work, collaboration with other teachers to improve their understanding of subjects and students' thinking, and develop new approaches to teaching that are relevant and useful for them and their students."

(Darling-Hammond, 1997, pg. 236)

Implications

Two essential aspects of standards-based reforms have helped shape the context for improved literacy practice: the commitment to high standards for all students, and the use of assessment data to make more informed instructional decisions about individual students and to evaluate program effectiveness. At both the philosophical and practical levels, the commitment to high standards for all learners has profound implications for schools. Shared accountability for all students will influence the choice of assessment tools, how teachers are supported in their use, and how the results are used. For individual students and in the aggregate, assessment data can be a powerful lever for improvement.

Now that the MEA has been aligned to the *Learning Results*, the data schools receive each year should provide a clearer picture of student achievement toward the common standards. While the *Learning Results* statute calls for a balance of state and local assessments to monitor progress toward meeting the standards, most schools are still in the formative stages of assessment system development. In addition, for MEA and local data to be used effectively, schools will need to ensure that assessment data analysis is given high priority status in planning for professional development.

Questions for Further Inquiry

- To what extent is literacy instruction grounded in the belief that all students can and must learn to communicate effectively through reading, writing, speaking, and listening?
- What formal and informal literacy data are currently being collected about students in schools, districts, and statewide?
- How are assessment data being used to inform instruction?
- How strong is the link between assessment data and the processes used in Maine schools to plan for professional development?

A Closer Look . . . *Using Data*

As a result of weak scores on the first MEAs, given in 1986, Westbrook decided to hire a specialist to focus on Language Arts in grades K-8. Over the next few years, several resulting changes led to improved MEA scores but we still felt further improvement was possible. Administrators started looking at the data on programming trends in the district. In particular, we looked at the numbers and percentage of children being referred to, and participating in, Title I and special education programs. That information led to a search for a program to target at-risk children in first grade. We were interested in implementing an early intervention program with a strong basis in research that would be annually evaluated for effectiveness. Once this was in place, we turned our attention to looking at the numbers of children recommended for retention. In the process, it occurred to us that we were providing high quality staff development for special reading teachers but not for classroom teachers at K-2. Our continued examination of the data led us to develop an in-classroom coaching model that helped build in-house capacity while at the same time providing high quality, on-going staff development.

With positive results showing annually on district K-2 assessments, which we follow closely, Westbrook has begun to focus on grades 3-5. Unfortunately, there is very little programming available at the current time for the intermediate grades. So, we are using what we know from the K-2 level and applying the same staff development model for 3-5 teachers, including in-class coaching by district trained coaches.

Another review of district data showed that, due to an increase in struggling readers moving into the district in the intermediate grades, we needed to address what we were doing in our grades 3-5 Title I program. As a result, we are in the beginning stages of implementing a researched-based program on comprehension in Title I. Westbrook has learned to use several types of district data in addition to our own observations to make better decisions and improve our schools.

Pat Jackman,
Language Arts Director
Westbrook School Department

3 School Staff Work Together To Find Solutions To Instructional Issues

We've been developing a model of getting knowledge we don't have from another source and then teachers and principals use this knowledge to inform collaborative decisions about what our focus should be. Principals and teachers find the time to do this work together.

– Bar Harbor conference participant

Data from schools surveyed for this project indicate a collaborative effort among staff to find solutions to literacy instructional issues related to literacy. Survey data that point to this collaborative effort include:

- 60% of schools report high faculty focus on reading;
- Of those schools sampled, 69% report a "considerable" level of communication among staff regarding reading instruction and student progress; and
- 57% of schools report "considerable" congruence in the methods and materials used among classroom teachers and/or special education teachers.

This collaborative effort described in the survey is further highlighted by the experiences shared by the conference participants. All of the schools in the conference sample emphasized the importance of building and maintaining a climate where everyone works toward common goals. Conference participants stressed the importance of open discussion regarding different approaches to reading, with discussion leading to consensus around key points. As described earlier, staff development activities had helped teachers learn how to set a goal, work toward it, assess progress, and then adjust the goal accordingly. Using this recursive model revealed that encouraging open discussion of different teacher philosophies about literacy and then arriving at consensus around key points are critical ingredients in ensuring student success. Schools described gradual shifts from individual teachers working in individual classrooms to a broader collaboration, or as one teacher expressed it, "the whole school…moving in the direction of showing students what good work looks like."

Shared Accountability

Since all the schools in the conference sample had used student performance data to make collaborative decisions, it is clear they

wanted to hold themselves accountable for making real progress with their students. Examination of data from assessments teachers employ often led to alternative instructional strategies. This reveals a significant change from more traditional approaches that stressed giving students more time with the same materials and classroom activities. The collegiality described in these schools had a clear focus – improved student learning – and did not become an end in itself.

Creative Solutions to the Time Problem

Finding time to work together was mentioned as a problem, but schools found various ways to make time available. Principals were key in helping to rearrange assignments and schedules to allow time for teachers to meet during the school day. One principal explained how she had managed to schedule "specials" to provide common planning time for each grade. Many teachers spoke of meeting at lunch and of focusing faculty meetings on instructional issues rather than administrative issues.

Stability and Flexibility

Participants in the Bar Harbor conference identified two other factors that may contribute to a staff's ability to work collaboratively when addressing literacy issues, namely the stability of a school's staff over time and having flexible frameworks in place for finding solutions to instructional problems.

"The important concept, here, is that of critical discussions…we want a group of teachers to understand the nature of the schooling experience from the standpoint of a student traveling through the school not just a student in an individual teacher's classroom. And we want them to talk with each other about this journey, as well as about goals for the students and the teaching practices in use."

(Richardson, 1998, p. 313)

Observing reading behavior informs a teachers's intuitive understanding of cognitive processes and her teaching improves. She has a way of gathering data during teaching and she has a way of keeping her explanations of her teaching in line with what her pupils actually do.

(Clay, 1997, p. 232)

Two schools mentioned the stability and strength of the staff as factors that had allowed them to devise ways to plan for and cope with barriers to student achievement in reading. Members of one school's staff had been in the school from 5 to 23 years with other teachers who "all want to be there, work well together, laugh and cry together and are very special." Other schools reported that improved practices could not have been accomplished without the ongoing commitment of veteran teachers. As new teachers were hired, experienced teachers had taken part in the hiring process and worked with the new teachers to help them understand and fit into the existing culture of the school.

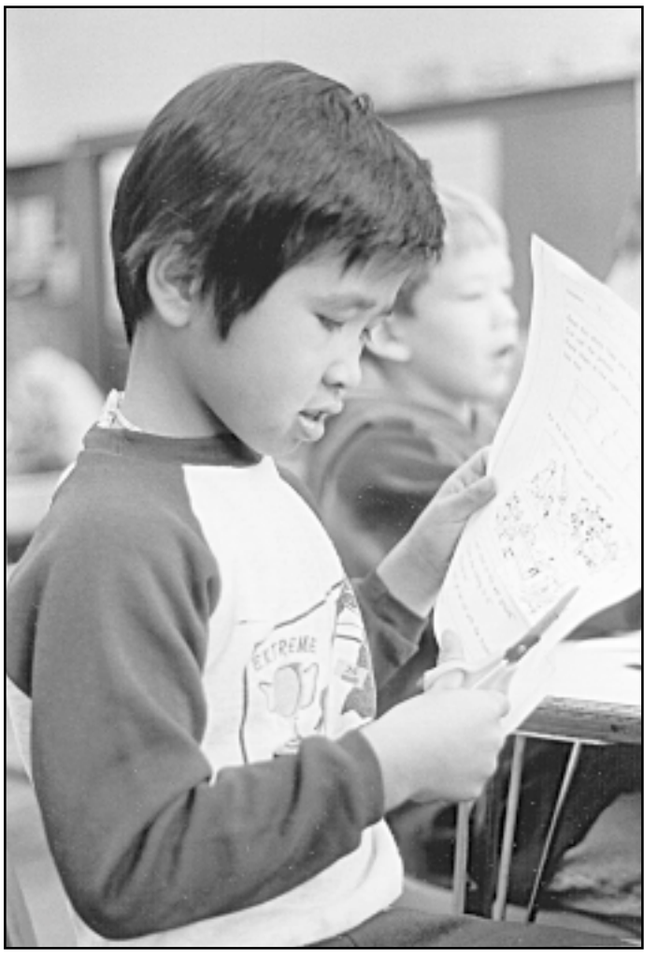
Schools in the conference sample also operated with flexibility—from the central office to the building level and from the principal to the classroom level. This flexibility was grounded in setting and striving to meet district goals for student achievement. The specific means of meeting these goals had been determined by teachers—within the frameworks set through staff development, colleague discussion, and consensus building. One principal explained how a new district curriculum coordinator had wanted her school to shift to a new basal program. When the principal demonstrated that their existing approach had resulted in student MEA scores rising from 265 to over 350, they were given the flexibility to continue using their preferred approach.

Implications

As noted previously, how schools structure the change process and support shared decision-making provides an important context for teacher collaboration. In literacy development and in other aspects of the school program, effective, collaborative problem solving—directed at improved results—occurs most successfully when it is consistent with the values and processes of the larger organizational context. Working together is strengthened when accompanied by a sense of shared accountability and a legitimate voice in decision-making. Among other challenges that schools must address in creating a climate for shared decision-making is finding adequate time. Traditionally, planning time for instruction involved individual teachers planning lessons and activities for their own classrooms. However, true collaboration and shared accountability for results will require additional joint planning time and resources for developing common assessments, applying conclusions drawn from examining observation data, and developing new instructional strategies.

Questions for Further Inquiry

- What mechanisms exist for enabling effective collaboration and communication around common inquiries?
- How are instructional problem areas identified and pursued in schools around Maine?
- What changes can be made in the school day and year to support collaborative inquiry?
- Where will the resources come from to support increased time for collaboration?



A Closer Look . . . *Working Together*

SAD #48's story started with a literacy specialist's determination to overcome the scattered nature of the literacy programs confined to separate schools and to put in place a district-wide vision of what is possible, backed up by a management system that makes it happen. We view our schools as part of a district learning community. Principals lead in facilitating the vision of schools where all students are valued. They provide key support for literacy experts to take charge of program development. Our teachers are provided adequate time, funding, and support for individual staff development supplied by in-house experts. We nurture the idea that we have the ability to design and create the best programs for our kids.

It is important that all practitioners truly understand literacy development and the thinking skills that support it. We have a district leader who facilitates district grade-level and school-wide meetings. Because of this strong administrative leadership around new literacy research, and progress at state and national levels around standards, teachers and principals are not spending wasted energy on finding the newest program that works. Instead, we spend our time perfecting our program and sharing strategies to put best practice to use in our classrooms.

We try to keep our professional development closely aligned with teacher self-assessment based on district goals, and monitored in terms of student learning outcomes. A good example is kindergarten and grade one spelling. Our community and teachers had concerns about how well our students were spelling, so we developed a spelling component in the context of our writing program instead of maintaining a separate program. The results have improved our combined early reading, writing, and spelling programs.

In addition, as part of our literacy training, groups of teachers tour our district three times a year to read and conference with all students. During this time, each K-3 student's development is assessed. Different towns are visited and teachers meet students from various backgrounds, economic status, and a wide variety of classrooms. The realization comes quickly that due to a solid vision about literacy, through training and common district resources, all children are offered the same advantages and are meeting the same high standards.

Ginny Secor,
District Literacy Specialist
SAD #48, Newport

4 Effective Leadership is Present, Though it Can Come From People in Different Roles

The accounts shared by conference participants make it clear that in all of their cases someone had to lead the effort, make decisions, persuade others to join in, and sustain the effort over time. The two roles most commonly mentioned by the conference participants were the literacy specialist and the principal. Participants were clear that supportive literacy specialists and principals did not see themselves dictating exact classroom practices. Rather, their efforts had been directed toward building the capacity of teachers to make effective instructional decisions.

Literacy Leadership: Classroom Teachers and Literacy Specialists

In the survey sample, 59% of the schools reported having a classroom teacher who was a strong literacy leader. In addition, 30% who returned surveys reported having a literacy staff development person on site. The literacy specialists in many of the schools among the conference participants had taken an active leadership role. They had spearheaded efforts to coordinate classroom and building assessments, gathered and interpreted assessment data, and worked to provide staff development opportunities. They had offered expert knowledge that influenced effective daily classroom practices and assisted teachers in employing alternative strategies with struggling readers.

The Principal's Role

According to conference participants, principals had leveraged resources, coordinated efforts with other parts of the district, and held all teachers to performance expectations. Effective principals had taken the initiative in "forcing the conversations" and getting teachers to surface disagreements. Principals were also described as "having patience, working one-on-one with teachers, and generally keeping things on track." Principals appeared to influence building climate positively by supporting their teachers' efforts and by communicating their admiration for the staff. Principals had also

helped to locate resources by writing grants to help fund staff development and by finding specific resources to help with difficult classroom issues.

Executive Leadership

Schools in multi-school districts identified the help that executive leadership and support can provide. One district's assistant superintendent had provided strong leadership regarding assessment records and ongoing staff development opportunities focused on literacy. In another account, a city superintendent was credited with giving both vision and structure to that district's efforts toward implementing the *Learning Results*.

Implications

The data suggest that building successful classroom strategies, particularly in a time of raised expectations, requires both the kind of focus that a good principal gives a school and access to expert knowledge which a good literacy specialist can provide. Literacy specialists serve as professional development leaders and coaches, model effective practices, and help both beginning and veteran teachers improve practice. Access to the specialized knowledge that

literacy specialists provide has served as a catalyst for improved practice in high performing schools. While it is not the only mechanism for providing access to expert knowledge, local school districts will need to evaluate their current literacy staffing plans and, if additional leadership is needed, plan for how to provide it.

As noted above, this literacy leadership needs to be balanced by school and district leadership, in part to help develop needed resources, but also to advocate and communicate priorities to parents and local policymakers. Elementary school principals are an especially important link in the literacy leadership team. Though many principals may have come into the role without an early literacy background, in order to effectively lead, evaluate, and support literacy programs, they must have or develop a solid knowledge base in the area of early literacy practices.

Finally, this investigation has confirmed the importance of teacher leadership in both the process and content of efforts to improve literacy achievement. Effective contexts for improving literacy practices must establish a philosophical commitment to, and provide mechanisms for, enhancing the leadership capacity of classroom teachers.

Questions for Further Inquiry

- What are the most common features of the literacy specialist role in Maine schools?
- Which of these features have the greatest impact on teachers and student achievement?
- How frequently is literacy leadership or consultation available to literacy teachers?
- Is there a high degree of philosophical and pedagogical agreement between the literacy specialists and classroom teachers? If not, what are the implications for practice?
- What mechanisms exist, and with what degree of effectiveness, for supporting literacy teacher leadership in Maine schools?

A Closer Look . . . *Leadership*

A number of years ago, our school decided to make decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment using information gained from educational research. When we began to gather classroom feedback from our first grades indicating that we needed to do some work in improving our instruction for students having difficulty learning to read and write, we went to the research base which dealt with emerging literacy issues. We discovered a 30-year span of work and research by Dr. Marie Clay out of New Zealand that dealt with the student at risk for learning to read and write in the second year of school. We began to explore how we might bring this knowledge base to our school. What began as a simple search for answers for a specific population of students expanded into a massive staff development project for our entire school.

Our first discovery was that Reading Recovery™ tutorial practices actually worked for our students most at risk for learning to read and write. What we didn't expect was how this discovery might impact the practices back in the larger classroom setting. We decided that if exemplary practices for teaching students were to become part of our classroom culture, each teacher needed to participate in a staff development procedure that would enhance his/her own professional repertoire of classroom teaching skills. We worked with one another to assure that as many teachers as possible were actively involved. This meant that rather than a day or two of "sit 'n git" learning, we needed to devise a project which would allow teachers to learn, practice, and get feedback over time with specific learning tasks laid out for us and a chance for some learning and reflection time.

Leadership came from a variety of sources. First of all, it came from teachers who recognized that new professional learning was important for the success of the students in their classrooms. What began as a first grade focus quickly grew into associated work by kindergarten and second grade teachers. As their learning progressed, these teachers sought ways to work as a cohesive K-2 team. Third and fourth grade teachers joined in the learning during the second and third years of the project. Leadership also came from the consultant who contracted to work with our school. We chose a staff developer who could commit to a long-term project (three years) with us. We experimented with distance learning using new technology, as the consultant hired was the lead researcher out of the National Reading Research Center at the University of Maryland at College Park, Maryland. Personal visits, videos, e-mails, reflective writing, careful organization of visit days, coaching and feedback were all components of the project. These components lined up with our research information on what makes successful staff development projects. Leadership was evident from support staff who helped solve the problems associated with freeing heavily scheduled, busy teachers so that they could take the time for on-the-job learning. Leadership from the University of Maine became important; the Literacy Department enabled us to train a Reading Recovery Teacher™ Leader and several Reading Recovery teachers and provided us with additional coursework in early literacy. Finally, the principal of the building acted as a resource and support person facilitating the learning for the staff, encouraging their progress, and working on building a strong teacher efficacy ethic, which allowed teachers to both realize that they could make a difference and to experiment with the new practices in a culture of trust and collegiality.

Jan A. Hoffman
Principal,
Wiscasset Primary School, Wiscasset

5 Parents and Community are Engaged in Multiple Ways

Every school in the conference sample stressed the importance of getting parents involved in reading with their children. Participants reported that books are sent home that children can read. Parents are encouraged to share that experience and to send feedback to the teacher. This confirms data from the survey that show 80% of the reporting schools have take-home book programs and 73% assign reading homework.

However, conference participants shared that there was variation from community to community regarding the degree to which parents participated in such programs. In general, parents who had supported their children's early language activities were eager to form a partnership. But not all parents had responded to the school's outreach efforts. In many cases, schools had gone to great lengths to include parents who might otherwise feel uncomfortable or unable to participate. Among the activities cited in the survey were holding literacy workshops for parents and offering professional development around parent volunteerism.

Communicating with Parents

Conference participants highlighted the need for establishing good communication with parents regarding literacy information. They mentioned a number of ways in which they had accomplished this task. One city school had bused parents to a local Boys and Girls Club for a less threatening place in which to hold conferences. Once there, children shared their own work with their parents. Schools with active parent participation mentioned the use of e-mail as a recent addition to their wide range of communication strategies. Obviously, such technological methods of communication are more available to some parents than to others. Authors' teas were held where children share stories and/or articles they have written and illustrated. A teacher in a rural school district commented on the importance of explaining school jargon: "Sometimes we make parents feel ignorant," she said and then explained how she had sent home explanations of such terms as "rubric," "MEA," and the "*Learning Results.*"

> ***"The typical American child enjoys many hundreds of hours of storybook reading and several thousand hours of overall literacy support during her or his preschool years. But there are also pockets of children who receive only a few minutes of story book reading per year. There are pockets of children who grow up with little tutelage in literacy or encouragement toward it, without exposure to grownups who like to read, without papers and pencils and books to fool with. How much will these children learn about print in their preschool years?"***
>
> *(Adams, 1990, p. 336-337)*

"Promoting literacy at home does not mean creating an academic setting and formally teaching children. Parents and other caregivers can take advantage of opportunities that arise in daily life to help their children develop language and literacy. Often, these are unplanned, casual acts, like commenting on words on an article of clothing or engaging children in conversation. At other times, it is a conscious effort to read good books with children or provide toys that promote good literacy development."

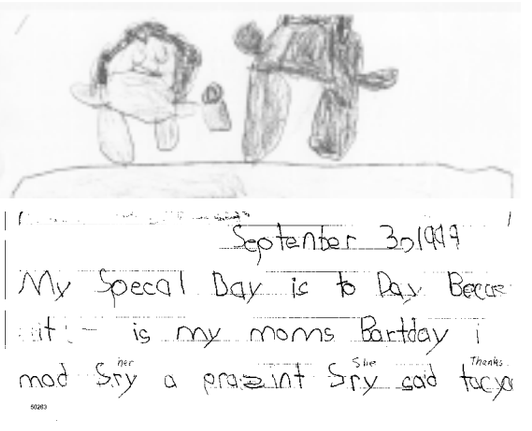
(National Research Council, 1999, pg. 16)

Volunteers

Survey findings indicate that 66.7% of the responding schools have parents or other community volunteers read to children. Conference sample schools also noted their use of volunteers in literacy-related activities. Many parents had volunteered in literacy activities and had become enthusiastic supporters of the reading-writing approach used by the teachers. One principal reported that parents loved the enthusiasm and the frequent opportunities their children have had to actually read in class, especially as contrasted with their own school experiences. A classroom teacher complimented the parents in her school for their readiness to volunteer and said, "We couldn't do it without them." Two schools mentioned wide use of community volunteers who had come into the schools to read with the children, to share storybook time, and to generally reinforce language skills. In addition to parents, some schools had used as readers local business people, grandparents, and college students as readers.

Reading Buddies

98.7% of the schools that responded to the survey have used some form of pair or buddy reading. In addition, all schools in the conference sample have used a variety of paired reading models, in some instances between older and younger students. Frequently classmates paired up to read together. One school reported on how a rag doll "Buddy" was used to build interest among kindergartners in reading. Usually the Buddy was left in a corner of the room when



the class left in the afternoon, but it sometimes moved. When the students came back in the morning, it was in a different place. The kindergartners had some creative explanations until they found Buddy relaxed in a chair with legs crossed before a false fireplace. The teacher eventually discovered the real explanation. Their building custodian had decided to give the children something to think about! One could call this a whole school effort!

Implications

The data strongly suggest that if parents are enlisted as partners in the literacy development of their children, student achievement will improve. To ensure that this critical component is present, schools will need to examine how they communicate with and involve parents. For true partnerships to be established, schools must honor the knowledge that parents possess about their children and endeavor to make all aspects of parent participation inviting. To the extent that other members of the community are enlisted as volunteer readers, tutors, or community resources, a consistently welcoming environment will help build and sustain this broader support network for young readers. The context of shared accountability will be further strengthened if parents and community members place a high value on high literacy standards for all children and demonstrate, with their involvement, that they are committed to achieving that goal.

"Our (parents') job is to find the best books to establish the reading habit. The reading habit, a seed planted early, takes deep root. Nourish the seedling once it starts to grow, but the most important step is to get it planted. The flowers come later."

— (Cullinan, 1992, pg. 34)

Questions for Further Inquiry

- What steps are schools taking to involve parents and community members in literacy development programs? Which actions are getting positive results?
- How is student achievement data shared with parents and the community?
- Since literacy practices have evolved over time, how are schools informing parents and the community about their current practices?
- How are schools mobilizing community volunteers and other resources?

A Closer Look . . . *Family Literacy*

Kate is a 21 year old single mother of an 8-month-old daughter, Julie, and a 6-year- old son, Jeremy. As a child, Kate struggled academically and dropped out of school before completing high school. As an adult and parent, her feelings toward school were quite negative.

Last year, Kate's son missed school frequently and was quickly falling behind. The school social worker, a partner in the family literacy collaborative, made a referral to the local family literacy program. Kate was immediately contacted by the family literacy counselor. After several home visits were made, she decided to join the program.

Kate now meets with her adult literacy teacher three times a week, has made tremendous progress in her own reading skills and is excited about learning. She also participates in a parent support group and intergenerational activities with her children. With assistance from the family literacy staff, she has been developing a better relationship with the school, eagerly working with school staff to help her son gain literacy skills, and even volunteering in his classroom. Jeremy is also doing much better at school, and is nearly working at grade level. Kate recently requested that her son be allowed to participate in the summer school program to maintain his progress. Kate is adamant that she wants her children to have a more positive school experience than she had.

Kate and Jeremy represent only one case of the many families across Maine who are benefiting from Family Literacy.

At the heart of children's literacy development is the influence of intergenerational family members, whether it be parents, grandparents, siblings, extended relatives, or other primary caregivers. Family is the initial and ongoing support network in the cycle of learning for children. When learning and literacy is challenging for parents and other family members, not only can children's literacy development be at risk, but parents who want to be effective forces in their children's lives can feel frustrated and alienated. Family Literacy is an initiative aimed at getting parents involved in their children's education, while at the same time, improving their own.

Family Literacy services include four major components:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
- Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
- Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.

More information about Maine Family Literacy programs can be obtained by contacting Becky Dyer in the Maine Department of Education (287-5854).

6 Various Resources are Used to Respond to Students' Needs

Traditionally, schools have changed literacy instruction by changing programs and materials, and have applied a narrow range of instructional options to the vast majority of learners. The data from both the survey and the conference sample, however, make it clear that Maine's teachers in the participating schools have utilized a variety of instructional strategies and materials to accomplish the task of helping children become literate. The four major approaches to reading instruction described in *Schools That Work* (Allington and Cunningham, 1996)—phonics-based, basal readers, literature-based, and composition-based—are reflected in the data. The participants considered their instruction to be "balanced" if a variety of techniques were employed, and were emphatic that no single program or set of materials could serve all children well. This was particularly true for children having reading difficulties. In addition, data suggest that increasingly, decisions about applying various instructional methods are grounded in assessments of students' needs.

Some schools have provided extensive staff development that emphasizes literacy development and the reading/writing processes. This staff development has provided a framework for learning about different strategies, approaches, and materials. For example, several schools mentioned staff development activities that had helped them understand the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics.

Instructional Strategies

The schools that were surveyed appeared to utilize a great variety of instructional strategies. The instructional strategies listed in **Table 4** on page 42 are used in at least 92% of the schools surveyed.

Instructional Materials

The majority of the schools attending the Bar Harbor conference have bought a wide assortment of trade books to provide children with choices in selecting reading material. Title I has been an important funding source for books. Teachers also have made significant personal investments to supplement whatever the district has

"Throughout the years, these four major approaches – phonics, basals, trade books, language experience/ writing – have been in and out of favor. Generally, once an approach has dominated long enough for educators to recognize its shortcomings, a different approach with different shortcomings replaces it. The question of which method is best cannot be answered because it is the wrong question. Each method has undeniable strength."

(Allington and Cunningham, 1996, p. 56)

"In the early grades, the best reading programs offer a balance of elements including reading for meaning and experiences with high-quality literature; intense, intentional, and systemic instruction in phonics; and ample opportunities to read and write. However, many commercial programs neglect certain aspects of instruction."

(Burns, Griffin, Snow, 1998, p. 129)

TABLE 4

INSRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Teacher Reads Aloud	Reading of Content Materials
Guided Reading of Leveled Text	Writing Process /Writing Workshop
Reading for Meaning	Spelling Instruction
Preparing for Reading	Think Aloud
Paired or Buddy Reading	Handwriting Instruction
Students Read Aloud	Sustained Silent Reading
Independent Reading Time	Sight Word Instruction
Shared Reading of Enlarged Text	

TABLE 5

FREQUENTLY USED MATERIALS

Trade Books	Leveled Texts
Books from Classroom Libraries	Reading Materials from a School Library
Books That are Taken Home to Read	Target Spelling Words at Each Grade Level
"Big Books"	"Little Books"
Variety of Reading Material	

provided. In addition to expanding their literature collections, some schools in the sample have adopted basal reading textbooks.

The most frequently used materials in literacy programs, according to the survey, are listed in **Table 5**.

Interventions

The term "intervention" as used in the survey refers to approaches schools have used to give some form of additional help to students who appear to be falling behind peers in their rate of learning. Several literacy intervention programs were also noted. Title I is a "compensatory" program intended to target extra funds to districts on the basis of the number of enrolled socio-economically disadvantaged children. Title I funds are used by local districts at their discretion, so long as federal and State guidelines are followed, and are often used in Maine to hire additional reading support personnel.

Survey data indicate the percent of schools using different types of reading interventions with Title I funds:

Schools are not limited to Title I-supported interventions for struggling readers. Innovative approaches such as the University of Southern Maine's "Project Story Boost" model, a description of which can be found on page 46, provide increased access to community-based resources.

TABLE 6

Reading Intervention	% of Schools
Title I Program Targeting K and 1st Grade	74.4%
Reading Recovery™	56.4%
Kindergarten Literacy Program	39.7%
Family Literacy	16.7%
Literacy Program for 4 Year-Olds	6.4%

One reason why the first two years of instruction may be critical for learning to read is because this is the formative stage of efficient or inefficient processing strategies – the means by which the child picks up and uses the information in print.

As older readers, they are difficult to help because they are habituated in their inefficiency and because their processing behaviors are hidden from view. In the terms of the computer age they have been poorly programmed. They wrote the program and we do not know how to get into it.

(Marie Clay, p. 313)

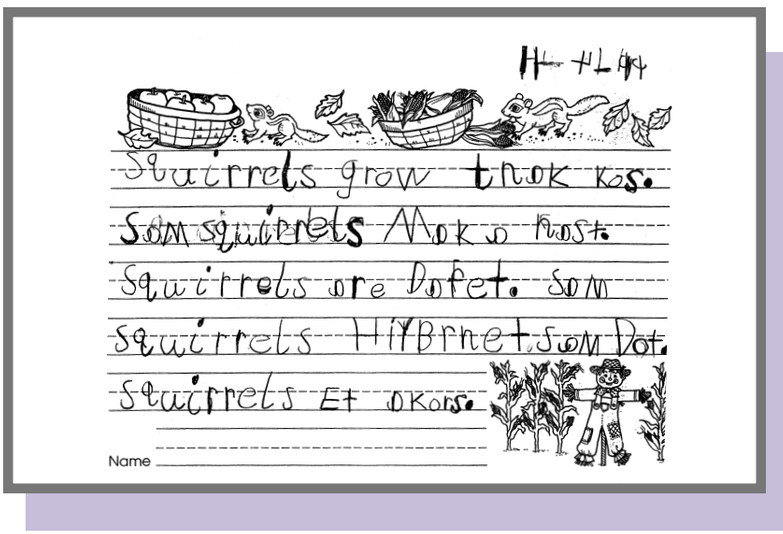
"I do not believe that a best method can be defined in outline. The effectiveness of a method depends too much on the details of its realization—its materials, its teachers, its students and the compatibility of each with the other. By extension, there can be no such thing as a universal method. To make the most of a set of materials (or to make the most for a group of students), the teacher must understand why each activity is included.

(Adams, 1990, p. 423)

Implications

Survey and conference responses indicate that most schools are employing a variety of instructional practices to meet the needs of students. Interestingly, survey and conference data reveal widespread agreement that no single program—whether literature-based or phonics-based—will work for all students. As teachers have become better diagnosticians—and in the process have developed more precise knowledge about which strategies students are using successfully and which strategies need strengthening — access to and support in using a variety of instructional methods is becoming more important for teachers.

To ensure that teacher decision making is informed and that consistent levels of expertise exist across all classrooms, teacher collaboration and support from literacy specialists must deepen the capacity in schools to employ a variety of strategies and materials skillfully. Given the increasingly central role of teacher decision making about instructional strategies, support for new teachers and the provision of ongoing learning for veteran teachers take on new importance. In addition, schools will need to examine how all members of the literacy instructional team—including educational technicians, tutors, and volunteers—are supported in their use of multiple strategies and materials. Finally, it will be necessary to monitor the effectiveness, over time, of each instructional component, using student achievement as the measure.



Written reflection to learning about squirrels.

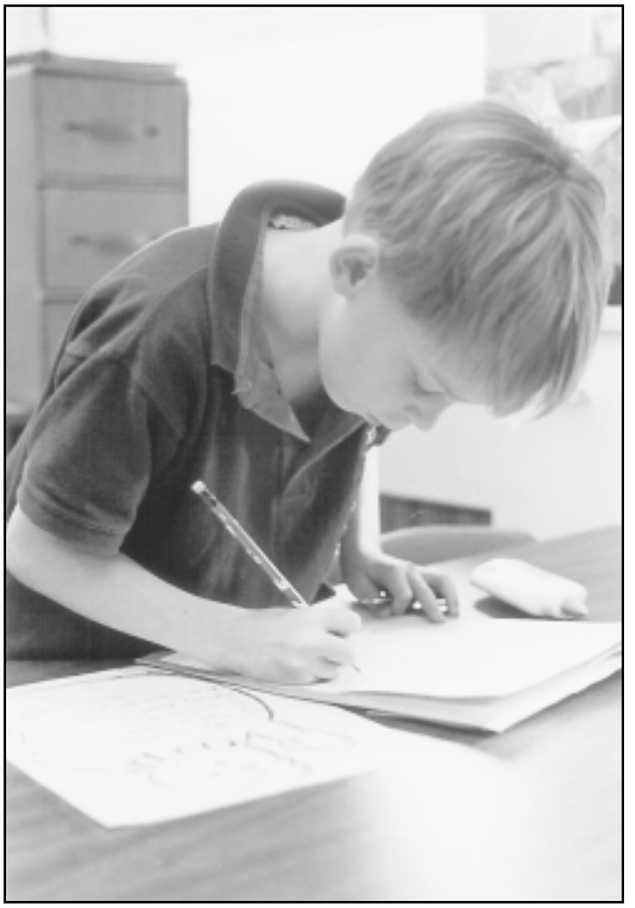
– First grader

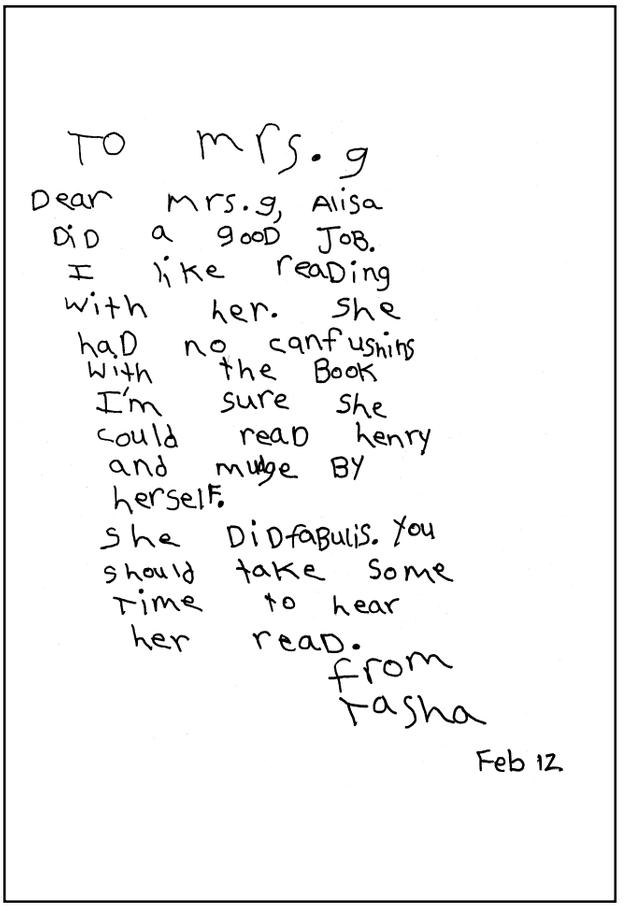
Questions for Further Inquiry

- What components of a balanced literacy program are present in schools?
- Are teachers and support staff trained to use a variety of research-based literacy practices?
- How can we use state and local assessment data to inform instructional decision-making?
- What interventions are in place for students who are not meeting expectations? How are decisions made about which strategies to employ?

Student using writing as a way to communicate with her teacher about shared reading.

— Mutigrade 1-2 classroom





TO mrs.g

Dear mrs.g, Alisa did a good JOB. I like reading with her. She had no canfushins With the Book I'm sure she could read henry and mudge BY herself. She DiDfabulis. You should take some Time to hear her read.

from Tasha

Feb 12.

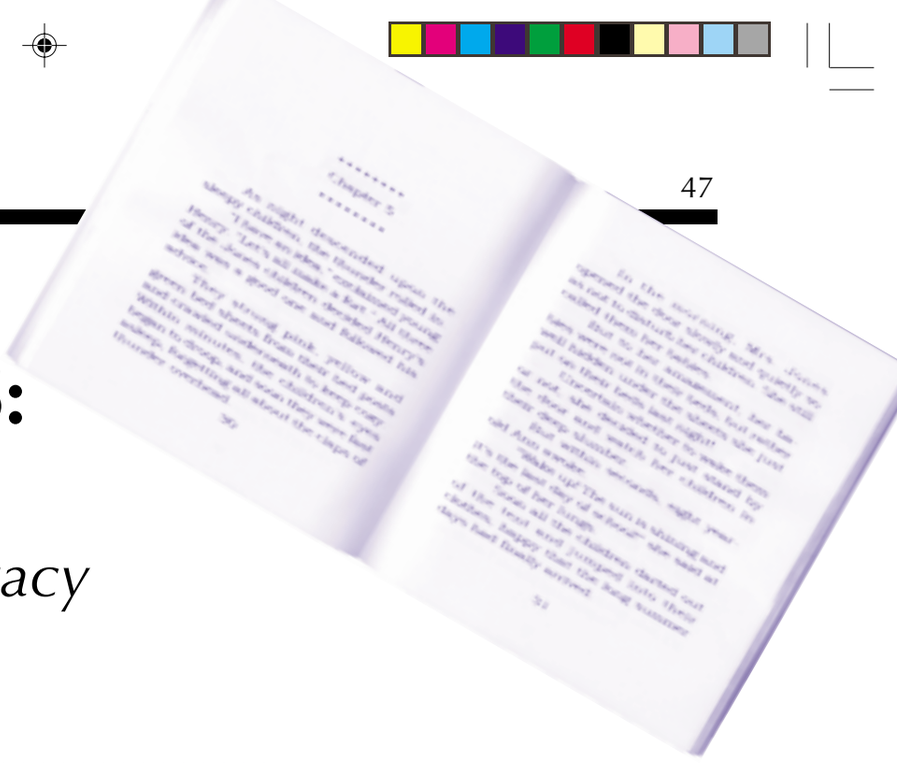
A Closer Look . . . *Project Story Boost*

Perhaps the greatest roadblock to acquiring literacy in the primary grades is lack of exposure to the world of books. While some children enter kindergarten with hundreds of hours of read-aloud experience and familiarity with a wide array of children's books and authors, other children are completely without these experiences. Familiarity with books, story language and text structure is an essential instructional goal for emergent readers. Until and unless this most essential foundational goal is realized, success in learning to read will be severely limited.

A collaborative effort between the University of Southern Maine (USM) and the Portland (Maine) public schools, Project "Story Boost" is an experimental, cost-effective intervention for "at risk" kindergarten children who have limited exposure to storybooks and who lack basic understanding about printed language. Those children for whom English is a second language may have limited English proficiency as well. Identified by their teachers at the beginning of the school year, these children are taken aside and read to, individually or in pairs, three or four times a week by trained "readers," who also engage the children in book discussions and retelling activities. Begun in 1993 with twelve kindergartners and two readers, the program has grown to serve 100 children per year in four inner city schools. Readers include parents, community volunteers, and USM education students, as well as work-study students participating in the "America Reads Challenge."

Kindergarten teachers have been uniformly enthusiastic about the perceived effects of the "Story Boost" program on children who participate for several months. Teachers repeatedly report not only increases in familiarity with stories by the children who participate in "Story Boost," but also increases in the children's positive literacy behaviors such as voluntary choice of reading and writing activities in the classroom, participation in whole class read-aloud sessions, growth in language (particularly vocabulary), and greatly enhanced interest in books and stories. Project "Story Boost" has been replicated with local adaptations in many Southern and Central Maine schools, including Lewiston, Biddeford, Livermore Falls, Brunswick, Turner, Eddington, Bridgton, Naples, Warren, Wales, and Waterville.

Dr. Margo Wood
Professor of Literacy Education,
University of Southern Maine



CONCLUSIONS:

Major Challenges and Opportunities for Literacy Educators

A Solid Foundation is intended as an invitation to dialogue, not as a list of prescriptions that schools should follow. In that spirit, the conclusions that follow point to preliminary findings that emerge from the survey and conference data, ones that will form the basis for further Center for Inquiry investigations and could serve as a starting point for discussion in and among local schools. While the data point to challenges in student achievement and in how schools organize to address them, clear trends on what schools can do to improve are also emerging.

On-going Professional Development is Critical

Once children come to school, they have a right to "expert instruction" (Darling-Hammond, 1997) by teachers who believe all children can learn, and who have continuing opportunities to expand their expertise. While research has clarified the benefits and drawbacks of instructional approaches, far too often decisions about reading instruction have been made with the emphasis on which reading program a school or a district will adopt. No single program can possibly work for all children. Teachers must receive ongoing education to understand and implement a range of methods for supporting individual learners. Our teachers represent a substantial human resource, and investing in their continued learning can and will pay dividends for children. In addition, higher expectations for all children demand that the structures of schooling provide time and varied opportunities for teachers to collaborate.

Teachers Must be Given Opportunities to Learn From Each Other

The data strongly suggest that *how* schools go about their work is at least as important, if not more so, than specific instructional decisions. That is, schools may choose different materials, instructional methods, and intervention strategies and still consistently obtain positive results in student achievement. Indeed, all schools represented at the Bar Harbor conference referred to the importance of employing a "balanced program" to meet the needs of all learners. What stands out as significant is that the context in which these instructional decisions are made *is* important, and that working together to improve practice—and get results—is a common characteristic that rises to the level of essential. Through such sharing, teachers can contribute to the general basis of expert knowledge that transcends what an individual teacher can learn on his or her own. Teachers in the study spoke of the power of seeing children's work across different classrooms and of the commitment of professional groups in seeking ways to help children attain higher performance standards.

Schools Must be Organized Around Literacy For All

How schools establish and follow through on the belief that all children can succeed is important. Children may need different

approaches. The use of on-going assessment to inform instruction enables teachers to select practices that capitalize on children's strengths, support their needs, and ensure that all children continue to make progress. The need to apply a range of literacy practices to individual learners helps underscore the need for collaboration among educators across grade levels. Intervention specialists such as Title I, special education or Reading Recovery™ teachers can also be very helpful when they collaborate with classroom teachers to connect their specialized intervention strategies to daily classroom instruction. It is critical that regular, on-going communication be maintained between teachers and intervention specialists to effectively guide instruction for individual learners. Bringing parents into the picture and communicating with them as much as possible helps children continue to develop their skills, too. Success with literacy development requires a team effort, shared accountability, and a strong commitment to helping every child learn to read and write.

Assessing Children's Work to Inform Instruction is a Powerful Tool for Improvement

This study began with a recommendation from the Commissioner's Assessment Design Team to find out more about early literacy instructional and assessment practices. The data clearly point to a large number of schools that are using assessment on a regular basis to help them understand each child's literacy skills and needs. Specific assessment tools are helping teachers understand what strategies children are using successfully and which strategies need further support. The assessment tools require in-depth understanding on the part of the teacher to be used to their fullest advantage. We should not underestimate the challenge that such frequent and individual observation of student work poses for the classroom teacher. Support is critical both in professional development and in providing supportive school structures that allow teachers to engage in thoughtful, frequent assessment with frequent opportunities to discuss the results with their colleagues. In addition, we must continue to evaluate the overall role of assessment to ensure that it supports and does not detract from learning.

"Reading specialists and other specialists need to be defined so that there is two-way communication between specialists and classroom teachers about the needs of all children at risk of, and experiencing, reading difficulties. Coordination is needed at the instruction level, so that children are taught with methodologies that are not fragmented."

— (Burns, Griffin, Snow, 1998, p. 140)

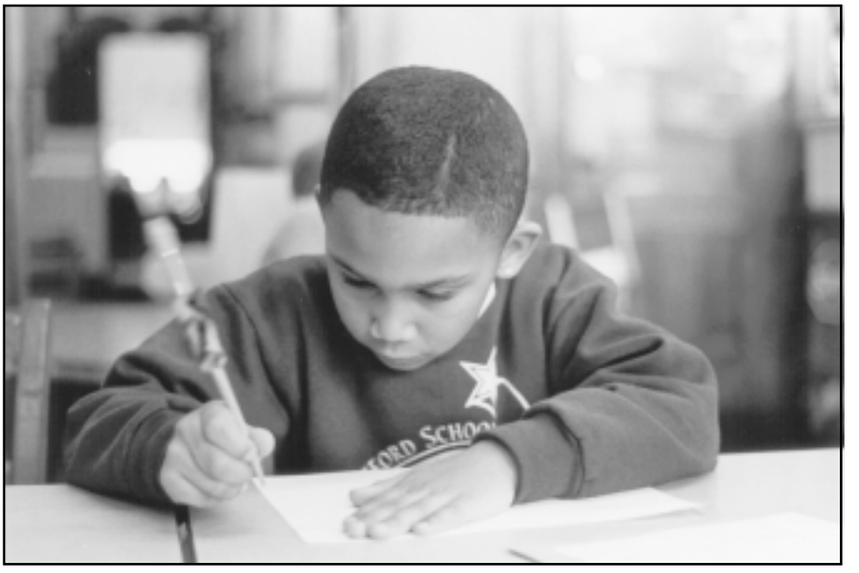
Literacy Starts Before School and Continues for Life

"If you look into the childhoods of adults who have succeeded in school and life, more often than not you find they have been taken through fields of experience that enriched their minds. Most often they were read to…An adult in their lives talked with them a lot. They had library cards and some books on their bedroom shelves, drawing paper, crayons and pencils. Quite simply those are the tiny, inexpensive seeds that grow readers."

(Jim Trelease in Cullinan, pg. 2-3)

Literacy instruction cannot be confined to the first four years of school. While this report focuses on early literacy practices in schools, independent reading levels build on experiences children have before they even enter school and should be developed throughout the elementary grades and into the secondary grades. Researchers have increasingly pointed to the importance of early childhood experiences in building a foundation for literacy. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998) highlights how critical it is for parents and other caregivers to build reading skills on the foundation of children's natural language acquisition. National and state level efforts have raised the awareness that parents are indeed their children's first teachers and have encouraged parents and other caregivers to read early and often to their children. Researchers have also pointed out the importance of parents and other caregivers consciously engaging children in conversations that build vocabularies.

Once children enter school, it is imperative for teachers across the grades to recognize how to build on early literacy skills. All teachers should have an understanding of how language works and how literacy development can be nurtured in their programs. In order to build comprehensive, consistent literacy programs, effective communication among all educators invested in literacy must be ongoing.



We Must Build on *A Solid Foundation*

As with all first reports, for every question we think we can address, a hundred more spring to mind. For instance, while we have good data on schools' attempts to communicate with parents, we have little or no data about communication between schools and preschool service providers or adult education literacy programs that may involve some of the parents of children attending a given school. Yet, it is becoming increasingly clear that successful school performance is linked to what happens before children come to school, particularly for those children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. It will also be important to examine and strengthen literacy practices in the grades beyond the primary years. We need further investigation of the professional contexts, so clearly important to the schools in the study, that have set the stage for improvements in student learning.

Much of what has been said in this study about supportive contexts for teachers of early literacy could be said for other subject areas as well. However, this study focuses on early literacy because it is so fundamental to the successful education of all children. It is also a subject that can be taken for granted. Teachers and researchers know, however, that no one set of strategies will work for all children and that without good teacher preparation and ongoing professional development, effective literacy skills for all students will not be realized. The thoughtful ways in which schools in this study, and others like them throughout the state, are approaching this challenge deserve our gratitude and ongoing support.

There is evidence here that the strength of early literacy programs in Maine, and the knowledge base on which they are built, has increased dramatically in recent years. Professional sharing and research continue to expand that knowledge base and have created an infrastructure of human connections and ideas. These assets represent a tremendous opportunity for early literacy educators. Yet, achievement results point to significant challenges in reaching the goal, expressed in Maine's *Learning Results*, of high literacy standards for all students. Here, at the beginning of a new millennium, this powerful commitment continues to shape our assumptions about reachable goals for student learning and how we organize schools to meet them. Strong literacy skills are the foundation on which we can build a future where all students achieve high standards.